

HUMANS OF NEW YORK SHORT STORIES

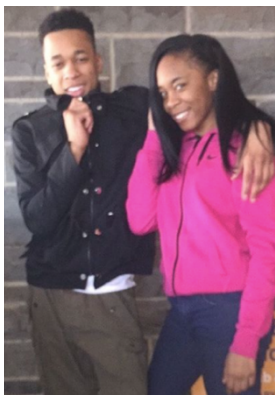
Stories about human struggle and triumph from around the world

Love and Loss in Life

New York, USA



Anthony knew exactly what he was going to do. Nobody else in our school was talking about being a CEO or starting a company-- but those were his goals. And he was always networking. He'd walk straight into our principal's office, sit on the couch, and just start talking. I was like: 'Wow. How does he gain all that confidence?' Especially coming from where we came from. He was like a brother to me. He pushed me. He'd get mad if I was late for school. He wanted both of us to graduate top ten in our class. He was someone who told me: 'You're capable of X, Y, and Z.' I never had a strong support system, so nobody else was speaking that stuff to me. On the day we graduated, he was so excited for me. He kept shaking my shoulders, screaming: 'We did it! We did it!' During college he'd visit me on the weekends. He really helped me through that first year. I'd never been to school with white people before. My whole life I'd been focused on survival. But these kids had studied abroad. They'd taken college placement courses. My whole idea of normal was turned upside down. Of course, Anthony fit right in. He could show up anywhere, so I took a lot of inspiration from that. One night he invited me to a party on his campus. But I decided to stay in. The next morning, I woke up to a phone call telling me that he'd been stabbed. I logged onto social media and saw posts saying, 'Rest in Peace.' It was completely random. He'd jumped in to defend a friend. Even the media couldn't find a way to blame him. Anthony was a good kid, in the wrong place, at the wrong time. It's been really



tough without him. I've had to learn to be proud of myself without him in my ear saying: 'I'm proud of you.' But I've thought about him every time I've reached a milestone-- like when I finally studied abroad in Spain. On the day of my graduation, his college was holding its ceremony at the same time, and Anthony was given an honorary degree. His little nephew accepted it on his behalf. Right as I was finishing my commencement, his sister texted me the pictures. And that's when the tears came down. Somehow, we'd graduated together again. I couldn't help but scream at the sky: 'We did it, Ant! We did it!'"

Paris, France



“He fell down on his birthday. We’d just celebrated with a party. He was standing on a ladder, trying to fix a shelf, and he fell. It was all very sudden. He was in a coma for a week and then he was gone. After his death, I began to write in a journal. On the first pages I wrote about his final days. I was so sad. I just needed to process what happened. But then I kept going back, back, writing everything I could remember: the walks we had together, the places we visited, museums, castles,

holidays with the children. I carried a pen with me at all times. Every time I had a memory, I’d write it down. We’d known each other since we were fourteen years old. We’d take walks in this park back then—with our parents’ permission, of course. It’s been almost nine months since his death. I’m feeling a little better. I’m still writing, but it’s not so much about memories anymore. It’s more spiritual now. I think he’s still evolving somewhere. One night I saw him in a dream. It was the young Claude. Twenty-five or thirty years old. It was so real. I don’t even think it was a dream. I could feel him there. He was standing in a doorway, dressed completely in red. And Claude never wore red. But when I reached out to hug him, the door closed, and he disappeared. I believe he’s still out there somewhere. And that I’ll see him again on the other side of that door.” (Paris, France)

New York, USA

“A few months ago, my friend drowned in a swimming pool while I was with him. We were just hanging out. I was cooking for us. Then I stepped away to take a phone call, and when I came back, he was face down at the bottom of the pool. I was only gone for a few minutes. I don’t even know what happened. He never told me that he couldn’t swim. I tried CPR and he was still alive when the ambulance came. I



prayed so hard. I called everyone I knew and asked them to pray. I called prayer lines. Everyone prayed for him at church. I was hoping that everything would be OK and that this could just be part of my testimony. I was hoping I could say: ‘I dedicated my life to God, and here’s what happened.’ But my friend passed away. He’d actually been dead the entire time I was praying. And it’s been so confusing for me. Because right before this happened, I’d been feeling so close to God. I was volunteering at church. I was going to midweek services. I was reading books. I was giving more of my money. I was partying less. I was trying to stay positive, and be mindful, and use less bad words. And I felt so close to God. I’d have conversations with him while standing on the subway platform. But it’s been hard lately. It’s hard to read my Bible verses. I’m scared to ask for anything. I say, ‘thank you’ when I wake up every morning, but anything beyond that is very difficult.”

Rome, Italy

“Life was easy as a child. I grew up in Burkina Faso. My father was a primary school teacher and we had everything we needed. But he died when I was eleven. And three years later my mother passed away, so I became an orphan. I was left with my brother and sister. They were very young. Almost too young to remember. And we had nothing. I had to learn how to take care of them. My brother especially was very traumatized. But I swore, swore, swore: we would never leave school and we’d never be separated. I dropped out of seminary and enrolled in a technical school. I fought hard. I sold small things. I started a theater company. We were contracted by NGO’s to perform educational skits in remote villages. Then I studied social media and learned how to be a community manager. I have my own business now. I help artists and organizations with their digital presence. I have eight clients. Through all of this my brother and sister have been allies in my fight. We talk all the time. Even though I’m in Europe right now, I know everything that is happening in their lives. I paid for their education. I taught them what my parents taught me. Be honest. Work hard. And never give up. The best thing to do is never give up.” (Rome, Italy)



New York, USA



“My mother passed away suddenly while I was studying in America. It was such a dark moment for me. She had been the most important person in my life, and I wasn’t even with her when she died. I needed to get home to Zimbabwe for the funeral, but it was right before Christmas, so every flight was booked. The only ticket I could afford was a middle seat. It was so cramped. I couldn’t even move my legs. But I happened to notice an empty seat in the exit row behind me. The flight attendant allowed me to change places, and I sat down next to a white girl. I remember thinking: ‘She’s going to hate me for taking up her space.’ But instead, she smiled and made a joke. She said: ‘Welcome to exit row paradise.’ There was an immediate connection. Right away we began talking about deep things. I told her about my mother. And she told me that her father had also died suddenly while she was working overseas. We started sharing stories of our parents. And before we landed, she ordered two whiskey drinks in celebration of my mom. I spent two weeks in Zimbabwe. I told all my



friends that my mother had put an angel on my flight. My trip home wasn’t much easier. This time I had a long layover in London, so I sat down in the airport bar and ordered a beer. And in she walked. God had put us on the same flight once again. When we pulled out our tickets and looked at our seat numbers, we couldn’t believe it. She was seat 61. I was 60. I hadn’t even been looking to meet someone. I was determined to stay single and focus on my schoolwork.



But it was like she had been brought to me. Everyone who meets Hannah tells me how lucky I am. She is so kind, and smart, and accomplished. We dated for almost two years before we got married. When I gave a speech at our reception, I didn't need notes. Because I knew our story. I told everyone about that girl I met on a plane. And I was looking at her as I spoke, and she was now my wife, and it made me so emotional. It was so hard to know how to feel. I wanted my mom to meet her so bad. But if my mom was still here, I'd never have met her. Somehow I'd found the most important person in my life because I lost the most important person in my life."

Discussion Questions

1. What can we learn from experiencing the loss of a loved one?
2. Do you think pain and suffering have a purpose in this life? If so, what are their purposes?
3. Do you think our loved ones that pass away can still be present in our lives in some way – help us, give advice, or just show up? Or do you think those of us here that have lost someone see and feel only what we want and not what is actually there?
4. How can you hold on to your faith after extremely painful disappointments and losses?

What is Family?

Johannesburg, South Africa



"I'm trying to give Mom a chance to do other things. She wants to wash her hair and cook dinner, but the baby started crying. So I brought him outside to see if it would help. We've gone about thirty minutes without screaming. We're from Mozambique. I originally came here to find work as a ceiling installer, but I brought my wife along when we found out she was pregnant. The healthcare is much better in this country. It's too early for them to go back home because the child was born premature, but I'll feel safer when

they're gone. It's too dangerous for them here. South Africa is a good place to work, but they don't like us being here so much. The abuse mainly comes from other black people. They call us names. They tell us to go home. They attack us because they think we're stealing their jobs. But I'm just doing what I know. They don't understand what it's like in my country. You can't survive with kids. I'm just making the only choice I have." (Johannesburg, South Africa)

Cairo, Egypt



"I was a baby when I got married. I was only thirteen. I didn't have an adolescence. One day I'm a child going to school, and the next day I'm a mother—responsible for a home. I cried too much. I didn't know the person I married. He turned out to be a cold man. He had zero communication or understanding. I suffered for so long, but I endured it all so that I could raise my children well. But every human has a ceiling, and once you hit it-- it's over. For three years I planned my escape. I waited

until my children were older. Then one morning I left the keys on the table, dropped my kids off at school, and headed straight for the courts. I finally have freedom. I'm laid back. I'm relaxed. I can express my opinion. I do whatever I want. I just finished a wonderful vacation in Egypt with my daughter. Nobody causes me trouble anymore. These are the best years of my life."

Manila, Philippines

"My father died on the day he got out of prison, so I never knew him. I was on my own as a child. I wasn't able to go to school. I was hungry all the time. I'd wait all day by the marketplace until they threw out the rotten food. And if I couldn't find any food, I'd steal it. I've spent over twenty years of my life in prison. My last sentence was for murder. A man slapped my mother so I stabbed him in the heart. But I've been trying to change ever since I adopted my son. I convinced his parents to let me have him because they were neglecting him. He was extremely sick when I found him. He was skinny like a lizard. But now he's spoiled. Whenever he wants something, I give it to him. I don't want him to be like me. I want him to go to school. My neighbors are in awe of my son. He never begs or fights. He's very respectful because he's so afraid of me. I always tell him: 'If you ever fight or steal, I'm going to kill you.'" (Manila, Philippines)



Hong Kong



"I was thirty years old. The economy had collapsed. My husband had just passed away. I had two young children. I was working as a teacher, but it wasn't enough. It wasn't enough to send my kids to school. It wasn't even enough to feed a family. So, I found an agency that helps you find jobs overseas. They taught me to work in other peoples' homes: how to cook, how to clean things like that. On the day that I left Indonesia, my children were four and six. I brought them to my sister's house. I explained I had to go to work. Just 'go to work.' That's all I said. I've been gone now for almost twenty-five years. I could only visit my children every two years, when I was given a vacation. But I did provide for them. I sent all my money to my sister. I paid for their school. And they did well. They are both in pharmacy school now. But recently they've told me how much I hurt them. They're older now and I guess they think I can take it. They told me how everyone else had a mom. And how hard it was for them. I always wonder what life would have been like if my husband hadn't died. Sometimes I blame myself. I left my children. What kind of mother leaves her children? I still have one year on my contract, but after that I want to go back to Indonesia. I've grown old already. I hope I can become closer to my kids. I have two grandchildren now. I want to know them. I just hope I can make it better." (Hong Kong)

Johannesburg, South Africa

“I sold phone covers back in Ghana, but it wasn’t going anywhere. So, I came to South Africa to see if I could change my life. I tried to switch over to the clothing business. I knew how to sew, so I decided to give it a shot. But things are even worse than before. I can stand here all day and not get a single customer. I’ve been at it for three years, and I don’t even know why I’m still making an effort. I should have a wife by now. And a house. And kids. But I have nothing. How can I meet someone when I can’t even provide for myself? Recently I fell in love with a woman. She sells food around here. We used to talk every day and night. We bathed together, and slept together, and prayed together. She’d give me smiles and kisses. I didn’t have much, but I gave her what little I had. For once I was finally happy. Then she came over to my house one evening and saw that I didn’t have anything. No radio. No television. Nothing. And she pretended like everything was OK. She acted like it didn’t bother her. But two weeks later she broke off contact. She never said it was because I don’t have money. But it’s because I don’t have money. Sometimes I think I should just kill myself.”

(Johannesburg, South Africa)



“I’m on the way to buy soft drinks for my mother. I also fetch water, and sweep, and help her wash clothes. She calls me ‘boss’ because I work so hard, but I love to help her because she cares for me so much. She buys me clothes. She reads me storybooks. She sings me gospel songs. She helps me with my homework. She gives me medicine when I’m sick. One time she baked my friend a cake because his parents couldn’t afford any presents. I’m going to buy her a house one day. She’s very dark and beautiful. I really have a wonderful mother.”

New York, USA



“A couple weeks ago we were coming home from visiting my brother in Long Island and we stopped at a burger place off the highway. He had a Junior Whopper. I had a Whopper. We split the fries. And while we were eating, he said: ‘You know what Daddy? You’re a really great Daddy. I love you Daddy.’ And that got me. I almost choked on my burger. Because it wasn’t bedtime. He wasn’t leaving for school. It was just off the cuff.”

Tema, Ghana

My sister was the only girl in our family. There were four of us—but between me and her it was different. We were the closest in age, so we shared a lot. We shared the same bedroom. We shared the same food. And we shared a lot of secrets. That's why I was so disappointed that she didn't tell me about the pregnancy. She was already seven months along when I heard the news from a friend. When I confronted her, she tried to deny it. She only told the truth when I promised that I'd support her no matter what. My niece was born on December 19th. She was named



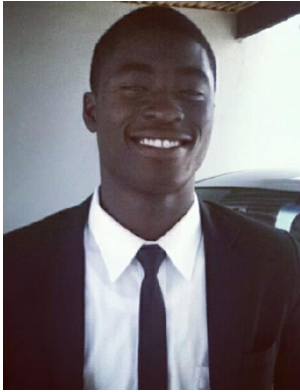
Aseda, which means 'thanksgiving.' After the birth, everything seemed fine. My sister and I were talking on the phone. She was sending me pictures. But on Christmas Eve the complications began. Her condition worsened quickly. The doctors said she needed to go to another hospital. But she never made it. She died next to me in the back of an ambulance. Before she passed, she told me-- in our native language, she said: 'Bro Ato, anything that you'd do for me, please do for my baby.' These words were written on my heart. Everything that followed was like a bad dream. I'd just lost my sister, and suddenly I was taking care of a preterm baby. I had to feed the child. There was no formula in the hospital. I had to search everywhere. I didn't have time to sleep. I didn't have time to mourn. But somehow, I found the strength. There are some things that you don't know are within you. Aseda is almost four months old now. My girlfriend has been helping me every step of the way. She has been amazing and I'm so thankful. Our plan is to legally adopt Aseda. It's a very personal thing for me. I want the child to stay with me. I've been with her from the very first hour. This is what I need to do for the baby. For my sister. And for humanity."



Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to be a mother?
2. Is it okay for a mother to leave her children to be raised by someone else for many years? What impact does this have on the children?
3. What type of sacrifices should we make for our families, and what type of sacrifices are too much, and should never be made?
4. What advice can you give to the Ghanaian man living in South Africa?
5. What does it mean to be a father?
6. Should fathers teach their children (sons and daughters) how to express their feelings (say "I love you? cry? Etc.)
7. What do all of these fathers from different parts of the world seem to desire the most in their relationships with their families?
8. What lessons can we learn about love and family from these stories?

Disappointment, Perseverance & Overcoming Obstacles



“We were summoned to the house of my girlfriend to discuss the situation. The atmosphere was very tense. Her family on one side of the living room. Mine on the other. Her grandfather was the first to speak: ‘You should be ashamed,’ he told me. ‘For what you’ve done to our family.’ My mother tried to calm him down. But he would not be appeased. He began to speak about upkeep, and money owed. But I knew my family had no money to give. My father didn’t speak a word for the entire meeting. But I could see the worry on his face: the pain, the sadness. He knew how difficult my life would be now. There are so few opportunities in Ghana. When you’re coming from a poor family like ours, you can’t afford to make a single mistake. My father had worked so hard to keep me on the right path. Every morning he hung a piece of paper on the wall of our house, with a list of our chores. And the biggest share was always given to me. Fix the stove- Paul. Fix the radio- Paul. Whenever any problem needed to be solved— Paul. I was a leader in my church from a very young age. And a leader in my school. But none of that mattered now. I kept looking at my girlfriend’s tummy, and I felt so bad for both of us. We were twenty and nineteen. And neither of us were ready. But at the end of the meeting, I made a promise to her entire family: ‘We will have this child,’ I told them. ‘And I will provide for everything.’ I spoke those words with so much confidence, but inside my heart was trembling. There are no social services in Ghana. No safety net. I would be entirely on my own, and I didn’t have a dollar in my pocket. In our culture a child born out of wedlock is seen as a great shame. Only my mother was happy about the baby. ‘Hallelujah,’ she said. ‘This is a life.’ She’s a very joyful woman. My mother isn’t literate, but she knows every church hymn by heart. The world could be coming to an end, and Adoma Ninson would still be singing, rejoicing, praising God. After the meeting she took me in her arms. ‘I named you after the Apostle Paul,’ she told me. ‘He was beaten. He went to prison. But he wrote fourteen epistles. This won’t be the end for you. You have so much more to write.’”



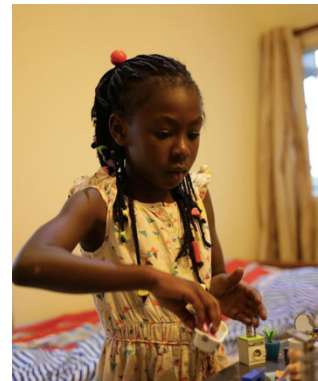
“My daughter was born three weeks early. I wasn’t there for the birth; I was working in another town. And that still hurts me today. When I arrived at the hospital, I was almost too scared to hold her. She looked so fragile. And all I could think was: ‘This human depends on me, and who I become.’ We named her Emmanuella, which means ‘God is with us.’ But we called her Ella for short. Custody is not a thing in Ghana. Everyone does what they can. When she was released from the hospital, Ella went to live with my girlfriend’s parents, and my job was to pay the bills. Always they were calling me, calling me: needing diapers, and clothes, and baby food. Nobody cared how I got it. All

that mattered was I bring it in. During this time, I developed a reputation as a very serious person. None of my college classmates knew I had a daughter. They only knew that I was always walking fast. I never wanted to hang out. I was trying to find some way out of my situation. Between classes I would print T-shirts in my dorm room. I knocked on every door, selling to everyone I could: churches, businesses, schools. Everything I made went to my daughter. Our visits together were usually short. We'd watch cartoons. Or read books. But whenever an order came in— I had to go. I missed so many little moments. But what else can you do, when you wake up every morning, as a father, without a dollar in your pocket? You must work. Always in the back of my mind was the promise I'd made— if we keep this child, I will give her a great life. But three years passed by, and I couldn't even provide her with a proper bedroom, in a proper home. Everything went toward daily supplies. I had no savings. It began to seem like my daughter would suffer for my mistakes. Then one day a friend returned from an overseas trip with a new camera. I noticed he was using it to photograph weddings and events. And in just a few hours he could make more than I'd make selling 100 T-shirts. If I could only get a camera of my own, it would allow me to be more of a father. But this friend came from a wealthy family. I grew up on a farm, with no electricity. Photography didn't seem like an option for someone like me.”



“I sold all my possessions. I even let go of my apartment. But still it was not enough for a camera. So, I turned to my mother for help. She sold second-hand clothes for a living. She knew nothing about photography. But when I told her a camera would help me be a father, she trusted me. She took out a loan and we purchased a budget model. It wasn't professional quality. But I was so proud of it. I wore it around my neck like a shoeshine boy, so people would say: ‘Look! Here comes a photographer!’ I was determined to learn everything about photography, but it wasn't really a thing in Ghana. There

were no fellowships, or workshops, or grants. It was hard to find a single photography book. I spent hours in the internet café, watching online tutorials from overseas. I committed to taking 200 photos per day. It became like a form of therapy for me. There was so much in my life I couldn't talk about, but this was a way to express myself. It took me away from all my thinking. My mother sat for me while I practiced my portraits. But my favorite subject was Ella. I documented all the times we spent together-- every time we went to the park or went on a walk. She loved posing for photos. And for the first time I noticed that she was beginning to look like me. But it was more than just looks. There was so much of me in her. She couldn't sit still. She'd ask so many questions. I bought her a journal and she filled up the pages with thoughts. Thoughts I never knew she had. It was beautiful to see, but it was scary too. Because she was getting more complex. And so were her needs. Ella told me that her dream was also to become a photographer-- so that she could photograph animals. Some nights we'd flip through old National Geographic



magazines, looking at animals. And whenever we found an interesting article, I'd google the photographer. That's how I first learned about the job of 'photojournalist.' It seemed like the perfect life: going everywhere, travelling, telling important stories. Stories that could educate people, and change minds. As a young boy I'd dreamed of making a difference in the world. But then I became a father. Maybe this was a chance to do both."



"The online tutorials made photojournalism sound easy: 'Quit your job, find the best story, get published.' But this advice was for Westerners. Nobody quits their job in Ghana. And even if you did—there's no place to publish your photos. I'd see pictures from Africa, and stories from Africa. But everything was done by foreign journalists. I tried photographing local festivals. I even snuck into a slaughterhouse to document the conditions. But when I pitched

these stories to publications, nobody even wrote me back. Every time I read an article; I would email the photographer. I'd ask them: 'How did you start? How did you do it?'

But I received very few responses. After several months I grew discouraged. I was desperate for some sort of community. Then one morning I saw a Facebook post about a meeting for photographers in the capital city of Accra. I couldn't believe it: a group of people, just like me. And they were Ghanaians. My own countrymen. I could ask them, face-to-face: 'How is this possible? In our society?'



The night before the meeting I was too excited to sleep. I woke up at dawn and took the first bus to the capital city. When I arrived at the location there was a woman stationed at the gate. She saw the budget camera hanging from my neck, and she stopped me. 'This is a meeting for professional photographers,' she said. 'Show me your body of



work.' All I had were the pictures on my memory card. They were pictures of my life, and pictures of my daughter. 'That is not a body of work,' she told me. Inside I could see the meeting was about to start. The photographers were taking their seats. 'Fine,' I told her. 'I'm not a photographer. But I'm here to learn. So that I can become a qualified person.' But she wouldn't listen. She closed the gate. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'This is a meeting for photographers.' On the bus ride home, I

called my mother. She'd been so excited about the meeting. She'd been praying and praying about it. But when she answered the phone, I could not speak. From my silence she could tell that I was holding onto my tears. 'This won't be the end for you,' she said. 'You are an Apostle. You have so much more to write.'"

“It was time for me to face the truth: there wasn’t a path for this kind of thing in Ghana. Photojournalism was not a way to feed my daughter. I stopped looking for stories to tell. I went back to weddings and events and took any job I was offered. Later that year I was hired to photograph a program at the University of Ghana. The work was barely paid, so I remember not wanting



to be there. But shortly after I arrived on campus, I noticed a tall foreigner with a camera. He seemed to be interviewing one of the students. I whispered to my friend: ‘I know that person. That is Humans of New York.’ My friend didn’t believe me. But I was sure because I’d seen him interviewed on one of my online tutorials. I did what I always do when I see another photographer—I approached him to ask for advice: ‘How did you start?’ ‘How did you

do it?’ But soon after we began speaking, he asked if he could interview me for his own project. To be honest I wasn’t very familiar with his work. So, I wasn’t prepared. He began asking very personal questions, like: ‘What is your greatest fear?’ And ‘What’s your greatest struggle?’ I was caught off guard. Maybe because I’m so hard working. Maybe because I switch off my emotions, but nobody had ever asked me about my problems before. I told him about my daughter, and the promise I’d made so many years ago: to give her a great life. I talked about my journey with photography. I told him that I hadn’t had much luck so far, but that I’d recently gotten a half-scholarship to the International Center of Photography. Except I couldn’t afford to



go. That’s when he said: ‘Show me your work.’ It was the same words that I’d heard from the woman at the gate, but this time I had something to show. I took my laptop out of my bag and pulled up my photos from Kenya. He looked at them very closely, for a long time. He seemed very interested. ‘Would your scholarship still be valid?’ he asked. ‘If you were to find the money?’ It seemed to me like maybe something was going to happen. We exchanged phone numbers. But I wasn’t hoping for much because I’d been disappointed so many times before. But then again if something was to happen— Amen.”

“My father is not an emotional man. But when I gave him the news, I could see the pride in his face. He was proud of the scholarship. Proud of everything I’d overcome. I was proud too. Oh boy, the things I was thinking! I felt like an important person. I was going to America to study at a famous school. ‘When I come back to Ghana,’ I thought. ‘Everyone in the country will know me.’ My mother was so excited that she burst into one of her hymns. But afterwards she prayed with me for hours. Because she knew how worried I was about my daughter. The program would last for a full year. I was scared for Ella’s wellbeing. Scared for our relationship. She would be with her mother and grandparents, but I was the one who helped with her homework. I was the one who picked her up from school most days. She loved when I picked her up, because her classmates would scream: ‘Your dad is here! Your father is here!’ But now I would be arranging a driver, from the other side of the world. During my final days in Ghana, I stopped



everything to be with her. We unpacked a lot of things between us. She asked me questions that she’d never asked before: mainly about her mother, and the reasons we weren’t together. I tried to cover in a certain way. I focused on my own mistakes. I explained that we were two different people, and we didn’t understand each other. Eventually she asked why she couldn’t come with me to America. I told her that it wasn’t possible, but that I was taking the trip for both of us. And when I came back home, I’d be a proper photographer. I’d be making real money, and we’d have time to be together. We’d have a proper home. She could have a room of her very own. We could get a dog. And we could travel. That was always the biggest thing between us—travel. Ella wanted so badly to travel. Before I left for New York, I bought us two tickets on an airplane. It was just a 45-minute flight, from my hometown to the capital. But it was enough for her to see the skies. She was so happy. She was taking photos of the clouds and taking photos of me. And it gave me some peace because I’d been making promises her entire life. At least I’d been able to fulfill this one.”



“When I landed in New York I was full of joy. I spent the first few days exploring the city. I saw places that I’d only seen in photographs: Times Square, Central Park, The Empire State Building. During orientation I met other students from all over the world. There were so many subjects to choose from, and I signed up for the maximum number of classes. I knew what I was sacrificing to be here. And I was determined to take advantage of every resource. Many of our lecturers had worked at famous magazines or newspapers. I couldn’t wait to meet them. One instructor told us to bring along our best photos to her workshop -- because she’d be providing a critique. This was a very

successful photo editor. She'd had a very long career and published several books. I'd never had an opportunity like this in Ghana, so I was excited to get her feedback. But I was very nervous too. When we arrived at the workshop, she told us to lay our selections on the table. She went around the room, one-by-one, and began to critique each student's photography. Most of her comments were constructive. She'd say: 'This isn't quite working,' or 'Try moving this here.' One student had taken photos of a snowfall in Massachusetts. She especially liked those. It looked like snow to me, but she called them 'dreamlike,' and 'surreal.' Finally she came to my photos. There were about forty of them. I thought they represented a wide range of my work. But she took one glance and waved them away with her hand. 'I don't want to see pictures from Africa,' she said. 'I've been looking at them my entire career. It's too much poverty and propaganda.' At first I was too embarrassed to speak, but then I grew angry. Were all African stories the same to her? Did they not have value? Because those were the stories I wanted to tell. One of my friends secretly snapped a photo of me, and you can see the anger in my face. When our workshop was finished, the lecturer showed us a copy of her new book. It was full of pictures of her own life, and her own family. She was very proud of it. The price was \$50, which was all the money I had. But I bought it anyway. Because I never wanted to forget what she said to me."

"Every day after class I went to the main branch of the New York Public Library. It was my favorite place in the city. I couldn't believe how big it was. This place had every book in the world. In Ghana I hadn't been able to find a single photography book, but here there were entire books with nothing but photos from Ghana. When I was learning to become a photographer, these books could have helped me so much. But the whole time they were here, 3000 miles away, sitting on a shelf. It didn't make sense to me. Each week I got a small stipend from Humans of New York. Half I sent home. With the remainder I went to second-hand bookstores around the city, buying their African photography books. I planned to bring them back home with me so that other young photographers would have something to study. The time difference with Ghana was five hours. So, every morning the first thing I did was call my daughter. I'd speak to her for an hour on her lunchbreak. At first, she was in denial about how long I'd be gone. It just seemed like another of Daddy's trips to her. She loved looking at pictures of all the new places I'd been. But after a few weeks the questions began. Always she was asking: 'When are you coming?' 'When are you coming?' I did my best to stay on top of everything, even though I was far away. I'd wake up at 3 AM to help her study for tests or complete her own projects. I knew every assignment and test score. I knew the friends she was making. I even knew the cartoons she was watching. I tried my best to be there-- but still, I wasn't there. The guilt began to weigh on me. But I did what I always do. I switched off my emotions. I pushed my mental health aside and reminded myself of the opportunity I was being given. But there was one other thing. Something I wasn't prepared for. Every morning I stopped into the same bodega to buy breakfast. And I kept



noticing that the owner was following me through the aisles. Sometimes this would happen in Ghana, but they'd always ask if you needed help. And this woman never asked if I needed help. So one morning I asked her: 'Is there a problem?' 'Yes,' she replied. 'Black people have been stealing from me.'"



"Growing up in Ghana, I'd never once had to think about my skin color. I saw myself as African. I saw myself as Ghanaian. I saw myself as Asante. But never black. Because all of us were black. And to become sensitive to your skin, for the first time, at the age of thirty—it messed me up. One morning I was greeting my fellow students in the lounge, when one of them said the strangest thing: 'I'm too white to shake your hand,' he said. I was so confused. Another student rushed to defend me. 'That was a racist comment,' he said. Others dismissed it as a bad joke. But the comment stuck inside me. I'd been rejected so many times in my life: for being too poor, for not being good enough, but never this. On that day my soul began to change. I thought: 'Maybe my kindness is the problem. Maybe if I'm less friendly, and keep to myself, I will never encounter this again.' I'd spend hours walking around the city alone with my camera. When I wasn't doing that, I was collecting photography books. I went to every bookstore in the city. It was something positive to focus on. I filled up an entire bookshelf in my apartment. Then another. My goal was to gather enough books to open a photo library in Ghana. It gave me comfort knowing that no matter what happened to me, my time here would be useful to someone. After I spoke to my daughter each morning, I would call my mother. We'd read the Bible together. She'd pray over me. We called it 'Morning Revival.' Sometimes I'd be calling her to complain, and she'd be singing, rejoicing. It made my problems seem so silly. My mother grew up in a small town. She had no clue about life in New York. 'You are an Apostle,' she would tell me. 'You have so much more to write.' One morning after we spoke, I jumped on the subway to go to school. Maybe I looked a little sad that day. I've wondered so many times if I looked sad. Or if my clothes were dirty. I'd bought my coat at a discount store. But it was a Columbia coat, and it wasn't dirty. I'm sure of it. I've thought about it so many times. Because when I got up to leave the train, a woman tapped me on the shoulder. She handed me a dollar. 'Buy yourself some food,' she said."



"My thoughts grew very dark. It felt like I was wearing new clothes, and I wanted to remove the clothes. But how could I remove my skin? And if I did—what would be left? I tried to push my feelings aside. I tried to switch off my emotions. But this time it wasn't working. I even stopped riding the subway because I didn't want to stand near the tracks. Every morning I would take a few moments to collect myself before I called my daughter. I never wanted her to see my sadness. For the

longest time I had been the one comforting her. But somewhere it switched. And she was the one keeping me going. I would force myself to smile and laugh at her silly jokes. Every time I tried to correct her—if I scolded her for being stubborn or disobedient-- she would tease me. ‘Everyone says I’m just like you,’ she’d say. It would always make me laugh. But this isn’t what I wanted for us. When I promised to give her a great life, all those years ago, this isn’t what I wanted. To be laughing



on the phone together. From 5000 miles away. She’s getting older so quickly. She doesn’t read the same books. I’ll send her small books, like we used to read together. But she doesn’t want them anymore. She wants cookbooks or traveling books. Sometimes I will send her clothes, and she’ll tell me: ‘Daddy, this doesn’t fit anymore.’ Or I’ll send her calendars with her favorite cartoon, but she’ll say: ‘Daddy, I don’t watch that anymore.’ And she’s tired of taking photos on her grandmother’s phone. She wants a professional camera now. It’s like: where has she gone to?

The Ella I left in Ghana is not the Ella I know now. There are times when she doesn’t feel like praying with me. And there are things she doesn’t want to speak about anymore. She still has a journal, and she still writes in it every day. But she never wants to show me what she’s written anymore. Now her journal has a key. Last week we were making lists for her upcoming birthday. I’ve always been the one who plans her birthday. We choose the cake together, and the games, and the theme. And here we were doing it again-- only this time on the phone. And it hit me. It hit me so hard. I’m going to miss another birthday.”



“One morning I went to photograph a protest in Queens. It was a political protest of some sort, and it was an angry crowd. I think many of the attendees were anti-immigrant. One man got right in my face, waved his poster, and started chanting: ‘Go Home, Go Home.’ In that moment it became clear to me: I do have a home. This is not my home, but I have a home. After that day I still worked hard on my schoolwork. But most of my energy went toward building a library in Ghana. I began to speak with booksellers about my vision, and many of them became eager to help.

They’d give me discounts. They’d tell friends about me. I started getting calls from galleries and private collectors, asking if they could make a donation. Sometimes it was hundreds of books at a time. Sometimes thousands. I filled up my entire apartment with books, then I rented a storage unit. Then another. Then another. I’ve collected 30,000 books so far. Enough to build the largest photo library in Africa. The books are currently in a shipping container en route to Ghana. But as my collection has grown, so has my dream. I want to build more than just a library. I want to build an entire learning center. A home for photography in Ghana. I’ve researched the properties. I’ve spoken to architects. I’ve reached out to the



appropriate ministries. And I've even chosen the name: 'Dikan.' Which in our Asante language means: 'To take the lead' The centerpiece will be the library. But there will also be a lecture hall where photographers from all over the world can come and teach. African photographers, especially. Who can teach African kids to tell African stories? There will never be another Paul Ninson. Who has to leave home, and feel this way, just to learn how to tell stories? Everyone will be welcome at Dikan. There will never be someone standing at the gate. No person will be too poor, or too inexperienced, to learn how to photograph. Even young kids will be welcome. There will be a room just for them. Where they can learn to photograph. And look at National Geographic magazines. And watch videos, about animals. I've even chosen the name for that too. We will call it 'Ella's Room.'"

~~Yesterday I shared the story of Ghanaian photographer [@pninson](#). For anyone who didn't have time for all twelve chapters: Paul had a child at a young age and taught himself photography to support his daughter. There were few resources available to him. As Paul explained, 'It was hard for me to find a single photography book in Ghana.' Paul was also frustrated that most photojournalism in Africa was being done by foreign journalists. When Paul was given the opportunity to study in America for a year, he began collecting photography books to bring home with him—so others would have something to study. This quickly evolved into a spiritual mission of sorts. He networked with booksellers. He received donations from private galleries and collectors. And he's now managed to collect over 30,000 photography books-- enough to build the largest photo library in Africa. Which is exactly what he intends to do. And we are currently fundraising to help him. Paul has assisted me several times over the past two years, and we've become very close. One of the first things I noticed is that he takes his religion very seriously. One of his core beliefs, which I've heard him say over and over, is: 'Givers never lack.' Paul was struggling hard in America. But no matter what I gave him—he'd give much of it away. He'd use the money to buy books for the library. He'd send it to people back in Ghana. He set up a community fridge in Brooklyn and kept it stocked. Paul always felt commanded to pass along whatever he was given. To quote another of his favorite sayings: 'We must be channels of blessing.' This is the kind of person that we're investing in with our fundraiser. Paul is going to help untold numbers of people with his library, because that's what he cares about more than anything else in life. I'm very grateful for his friendship, and the example he's provided me over the past two years. I'd love nothing more than if we could be a 'channel of blessing' for him—so that he can continue to help others. We've raised \$750,000 so far for [@dikancenter](#). Thanks to everyone who's contributed. If there's anyone who'd still like to support, you can do so through the link in my bio.

Washington D.C., USA



"I first ran for Congress in 1999, and I got beat. I just got whooped. I had been in the state legislature for a long time, I was in the minority party, I wasn't getting a lot done, and I was away from my family and putting a lot of strain on Michelle. Then for me to run and lose that bad, I was thinking maybe this isn't what I was cut out to do. I was forty years old, and I'd invested a lot of time and effort into

something that didn't seem to be working. But the thing that got me through that moment, and any other time that I've felt stuck, is to remind myself that it's about the work. Because if you're worrying about yourself—if you're thinking: 'Am I succeeding? Am I in the right position? Am I being appreciated?' – then you're going to end up feeling frustrated and stuck. But if you can keep it about the work, you'll always have a path. There's always something to be done."

Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities between Paul and Obama's stories?
2. What can we learn specifically from Paul's story?
3. What can we learn specifically from the tall foreigner with the camera that Paul met?
4. Why was life in the U.S. so difficult for Paul initially?
5. How did these two stories make you feel? What are you taking away from these stories?

Healing from Trauma: The Rwandan Genocide

"I inherited this orphanage from my father. I was in my twenties at the time. I had other dreams for my life, but the responsibility fell on me. When my father passed away, he begged me: 'Damas, please don't abandon the children.' So I promised him that I never would. When the genocide began in 1994, I'd been managing the orphanage for several years. I was thirty-three. I was newly married. I had a one-year-old child at home. When I heard news of the president's assassination, I immediately ran to comfort the children. Gunfire had begun to enter the air. We were housing about 65 children at the time. Many of them were Tutsis. I told the staff that nobody was allowed to leave the orphanage. As the day passed, more and more people began arriving. I had a reputation in the community for helping people. So everyone came to me for shelter. Their neighbors had turned against them. Many of them were being chased by killers. I knew that the penalty for sheltering Tutsis was death, but I didn't have the heart to turn them away. So I invited everyone inside. I thought: 'We have institutions in this country. The United Nations is here. The danger will be over soon.'



Our most desperate problem was water. The government had cut off our supply. And we were packed so densely that the heat was unbearable. Whenever we brought out jugs of water, one hundred liters would be consumed in less than a minute. After two weeks we'd run out completely. Then one morning I saw a car coming up the road. It had the markings of the Adventist Church. Out stepped a white man with a bulletproof vest. His name was Carl Wilkens. And he was the only American who had remained behind in Rwanda. 'I heard about you,' he said. 'And I've come to encourage you.' I took him around the property. I showed him all the people I was hiding. He could see that I was a nervous wreck. So, he began to pray with me. He told me: 'There is no way a man can survive this. But God will help us through.' I

told Carl that we desperately needed water. Without water we could not even cook our food. So, he promised me that he would try to help. After that Carl would drive to the orphanage each week. He'd bring water and milk for the kids. And to this day, I don't understand where he got it. All of the stores were closed. Carl was the only thing keeping us alive. Every week I was convinced that he would be killed on the journey. The roads were so dangerous. People would shoot out his tires. But every week he showed up with more water.

Over the next few days, the situation grew worse. Bombs were being dropped all around us. The streets had grown very loud. The killers would chant and scream while they chased people. All of the children were terrified. We couldn't hide the truth from them because they knew what was going on. Some of the children who were arriving from the outside had witnessed their parents being killed. Even the babies knew how to say: 'Don't kill me. I'm not a Tutsi.' The adolescent boys were especially vulnerable. We hid them in the ceiling. We had no fence around the orphanage back then, so there was nothing to protect us. Just a line of trees. Every day the militias would come looking for targets. I'd meet them here at the entrance and try to bribe them with food. I'd tell them: 'I know your families are hungry. Take this and go away.' Luckily, I had a shipping container full of porridge, corn, beans, and biscuits. But word spread quickly. The killers told each other: 'If you tell Damas that you are going to kill his children, he will give you food.' So more of them began to come. And their demands grew larger. So our food supply ran very low. And the people kept coming. Eventually 400 people were being hidden in the orphanage. We were like sardines in a can. We had no food. No water. No electricity. No life."

The militias would usually grow tired of killing people by 3 PM, and they would rest for the day. That's when I'd take people out of the ceiling to stretch their legs. I'd circle the property. I'd walk to a nearby pit where they threw dead bodies. I'd listen closely to see if anyone was still alive, and I'd bring any survivors inside the orphanage. During this time, I lost all my emotions and feelings. I became numb. It seemed like any moment the militias would kill us, or a bomb would accidentally hit the orphanage. And honestly, I was ready for death. It seemed like it would be the best thing for me. My wife was also feeling hopeless. We saw each other for just a few minutes every night. She was busy trying to keep the babies alive. She'd lost so much weight. Her breast milk was gone. And the children were barely alive. They'd lost all of their muscle. They were just skin and bones. And we were almost out of food so I could no longer bribe the killers. One day two men came in a truck asking for one of my employees by name. They pretended that they had a child with them that needed medical treatment. When she walked out to see the child, they pushed her into the truck and drove away. Thankfully I was able to pull a baby out of her arms. They killed her just a few meters from here, but it was too dangerous to recover her body until after the genocide."

One night I was walking the property when I heard the children screaming. They were saying, 'Papa! Papa! Papa!' The screams were coming from inside the office. When I ran to see what was happening, I found that a group of killers had entered the building. There were about fifteen of them. They were wearing camouflage and carrying flashlights. They had already begun to pull young men

out of the ceiling. I tried to stop them, but I was hit with the butt of a rifle. The blow fractured my arm. I didn't dare to speak after that. The killers were already angry. If I annoyed them anymore, they might harm the children. Six young men were dragged into the kitchen. They were beaten with pieces of wood that had nails sticking out. The killers were screaming: 'Where are the others? Where are the others?' At first the young men were begging for their lives, but their voices grew weak from loss of blood. The children heard everything and kept trying to see what was happening. I kept trying to chase them out of the room. I yelled at them to go back to bed. Eventually the young men were taken out to the bushes. All night they were tortured. I stood in the dark and listened to their voices. We were hiding hundreds of people at that point. I was sure they'd give everyone else away. But they never spoke. Their wives and family members were hiding in the ceiling, so they stayed silent until their deaths. They saved all of us. After the genocide, I built this memorial in their honor.

After people were discovered in the orphanage ceiling, the militia determined that I was a collaborator. They held a high-level meeting and passed a resolution to kill me. I barely slept that night. And the next morning I awoke to my name being called out over the radio. It was the voice of the Minister of Social Affairs, and he was ordering me to report immediately to the radio station. I was paralyzed with fear. I didn't know what to do. Should I go there and be killed? Or wait for them to come kill me? I felt like locking myself away, but my brother forced me to make a decision. So, I decided to drive to the radio station. The station director met me at the entrance and informed me that I'd be doing a live interview on the radio. It would be broadcast across the nation. He sat me down in front of a microphone. My mind was racing. My hands were trembling, but I did my best to not sound nervous. He started drilling me with questions. He asked why there were so many rumors about the orphanage. He asked if I was keeping any secrets. He asked how many people I was hiding. I steadied my voice. I told him: 'If I was hiding people, would I have come here to meet you? I have nothing but children. They're just babies.' He looked at me for a long time. Then he finally spoke into his microphone: 'Attention, militia! Damas Gisimba is no longer a suspect.'"

While I was being interviewed on the radio, Carl Wilkens was attempting an impossible mission. He'd gone to military headquarters and begged an official to let us transport children out of the orphanage. He wanted to move them to a protected church near the UN Mission. His request was denied because the children were Tutsi. But then a miracle happened. As he was leaving the building, the Prime Minister himself arrived for a meeting. Carl ran up to my him and began to plead for the children. The minister told him to slow down and explain himself clearly. Then not only did he grant him permission, but he offered two buses for the transportation. Carl called me and told me to wait at the church. He said he would bring the children to me. I thought it was a suicide mission. There were four hundred people hiding in the orphanage. Many of them were malnourished and looked like fugitives. It was clear they had been hiding out for months. Why would the killers allow them to escape on buses? But it was our



only chance, so I came to the church and waited. Carl told me the buses would arrive at 6 PM. But there was no sign of them by 8 PM. It had gotten completely dark. I was losing hope. But suddenly I heard people screaming: 'Tutsis! Tutsis! Tutsis!' The buses came around the curve, and pedestrians were chasing behind them. Inside I could see five people piled into every seat. The kids were hanging out the window, screaming: 'Papa! Papa! Papa!' Finally, all of us were out of danger. We sheltered in the church until the genocide was over, but it didn't take long. Three days later the capital was liberated. And all of the children had survived."

Butare, Rwanda



My father was well respected in the community. He was a university lecturer and a choir member. But he was always working, so my mother was primarily the one who raised us. Her name was Consolée. She had this deep sorrow about her. She was an orphan because her parents had been killed in the 1963 genocide. Whenever we asked her to tell the story of our grandparents, she'd just say: 'Give it time. Soon you'll see for yourself.' I tried to help her as much as I could. The eldest daughter acts like a mother in our culture, so I raised my six younger sisters. They thought I was too strict.

They were always saying that I behaved like a nun. But they looked up to me too. And they loved me. Occasionally I'd help to keep them out of trouble. When my sister Francine cut her foot on a bottle, she was terrified to tell our mother because she wasn't supposed to be barefoot. I helped her conceal the crime by cutting a hole in the bottom of her shoe. At night all my sisters would pile into my bed. They'd beg me to tell them stories. And I always did, until they fell asleep, and I'd carry them into their beds one by one. The youngest was a boy. He always took the longest because I had to rock him to sleep. His name was Edmond Richard, but we called him 'Bebe.' He was 1.5 years old when the genocide began."

When the presidential plane was shot down, people began to gossip about the impending genocide. The streets were empty. Nobody was travelling long distances. We started to hear tales of violence. Relatives from other regions would arrive on our doorstep with horror stories. My father came home one day and told us about a Tutsi janitor at the university. He cleaned clothes for the students. That day he'd been tortured to death with his own iron. I grew very depressed during this period. I wanted to be alone all the time. Some nights my family would sleep in a nearby church for safety, but I'd remain in the house alone. I could feel something terrible in the air. Then on April 21st, the genocide officially came to our town. The militia gathered up Tutsi pedestrians in the city center. They brought them to this stadium. There were 200 people in all. They put them in



lines. Then they opened the doors and invited the public to fill the seats. The governor was forced to sit in the front row. He had mixed blood and was against the genocide. After the last person was executed, they brought the governor down and killed him too. His body was paraded through the streets. The killers were screaming into an intercom: 'We've killed the governor! Anything is possible! Now let the hunt begin.'"

If you are being hunted, this bush is one of the best places to hide. Every genocide survivor in Rwanda can tell you about this type of bush. It's full of thorns. But if you crawl on your stomach, you can get inside. And if you can get inside— you can finally take a rest. The best hiding places are always the most dangerous ones. Farms were no good. Everyone who tried to hide on a farm was discovered. Toilets were no good either. Because that's where they dumped the bodies. You wanted to find a place where the killers were afraid to go. The higher the risk-- the less chance of getting caught. Swamps were one of the most popular choices because there were so many ways to die in there. It was easy to get stuck in the mud and drown. Most of us couldn't swim. Or the mosquitos could give you malaria. Or you could be killed by a single snakebite. But the worst were the crocodiles. I'd say fifty percent of the people who hid in the swamps were eaten by crocodiles. My brother tried hiding in a swamp. And he actually survived all these things. He made it all the way to the border with Burundi. But then a helicopter dropped fuel from above and set his swamp on fire."

Our family was a top target because my father was so prominent. So, when the genocide officially commenced, the killing squads came straight to our home. One of our neighbors peeled away from the group and ran ahead to warn us. He came down our street, screaming at the top of his lungs: 'Run away!' They are coming to kill you!' My mother immediately dropped to her knees and started to pray. My father yanked her off the ground. He told us all to get out. Everyone ran in different directions. I don't know why we split up, but there was gunfire and screaming all around. I followed my mother and sisters to a nearby plantation. The baby was with us. We stayed there for four days. But I didn't feel comfortable. All around I could hear people hunting for us. They were calling our names. We needed to find a new place. I begged my mother and sisters to run away with me, but they were too depressed. They didn't have the energy to move. So I went alone and returned to our house. I was looking for our father. I crouched down in a nearby bush and waited for him to return. Early in the morning a crowd of people came marching over the hill. My father was in the center. He was so tall that I could see his face. They marched him to this very spot, because he'd asked to be killed at his own home. I could see everything from the bush. I closed my eyes. I said: 'Please God, please change this man. Please make it a different person.' But when I opened my eyes— it was still his face. I saw everything. And the whole time I was trying to imagine it wasn't him. But when I opened my eyes, it was always him. They finished him off with machetes. When they finally left, I walked over to look at his body. He was seconds away from death. But he was still moving his head back and forth."

On the day I watched my father die, this is the skirt I was wearing. I was only eighteen years old. I completely lost my will to live. I walked down the street like a zombie. I came to this house. The

owner wasn't home at the time because she was busy looting my family's home. I tried to hide under her bed, but there was another Tutsi man there. He began yelling at me to leave. 'It's too small,' he said. 'You'll get us both killed.' So, I ran outside to jump in the toilet, but the killers were already at the door. They dragged the man out from under the bed and killed him before my eyes. They were about to kill me too, but the team leader said he had 'other plans for me.' And everyone listened to him because he had a gun. He started leading me toward a plantation. He told me to comply or he'd kill me. He made me lie down on the ground. He unbuttoned his shirt, lay down next to me, and tried to spread my legs. So, I grabbed his balls and squeezed as hard as I could. He started trying to punch me. So, I squeezed them harder and twisted. He kept writhing around but I didn't let go until he fainted. Then I began running through the dark. I couldn't see a thing. I fell into a latrine full of shit, and I remained there all night because I was too tired to move."

The next morning, I heard people calling my name and I decided to show myself. I was too exhausted to resist. They told me there had been a general pardon for women and children. And all of us who believed the rumor were taken to this place-- the house of a Tutsi widow. I found my mother and sisters when I arrived. They were still alive but were so weak and depressed that they could barely move. We stayed in this house for two weeks. There were sixteen of us here. Then one night a soldier came and told us that we were scheduled to be executed. My mother urged my younger sisters to run away, but none of them wanted to leave her side. I begged Francine to escape with me. She was the oldest. We had a chance. But she was too tired. She'd been raped a few days earlier. She told me she was ready for death. Eighty soldiers came to the house that night. They were carrying a list with our names. They began grabbing people. During the struggle, I jumped out the window and hid in a tree. My mother was forty-eight years old. Francine was sixteen. Olivia was fourteen. Noella was eleven. Augtavienne was seven. Claudette was four. And Bebe was almost two. I listened to their screams until I fainted."

I woke up to find that I'd been discovered by a soldier. He dragged me to my feet and led me down the street to this alleyway. He pointed his gun at me and told me to say goodbye to my life. At that point I felt ready to die. But that's when Mary came running out of her house. She fell at the soldier's feet and began pleading with him. 'Leave this girl for me,' she said. 'You've killed her entire family. Just leave this one for me. God sent her to me.' She offered the soldier all of her money. She told him: 'When the war is over, you can come back and take this girl for a wife.' And that's what finally convinced him. He handed me over. Mary took me inside and cooked me food. She gave me a change of clothes. She tried to wash my hair, but it was too thick, so she cut it all off. Then she hid me in the bushes behind her house. I stayed there for weeks. Every night Mary would bring me porridge and water. She gave me a little radio so I could follow the news reports. Each day the rebels were getting closer to our town. Mary would encourage me. She'd tell me that it would all be over soon. And that I'd be rescued. She promised me that I'd survive. And Mary was right. I did survive-- because of her."

There were twelve people in my family before the genocide. I'm the only one who survived. We recovered eight of the bodies. And we buried the bones we were able to find. I didn't trust anyone after the genocide. Even when I was rescued by the Rwandan Patriotic Front, I wouldn't take the food I was given. I thought it might be poisoned. So, I'd eat raw food from the fields. I was losing so much weight, but I didn't care. People looked at me like I was a statue. They assumed my emotions were frozen. They knew my family was dead and didn't want to ask me questions. So, I held it all in for decades. Who could I talk to anyway? In a nation of one million victims, how do I begin to tell my story? There's been too much tragedy for everyone. Some people lost their arms and legs. Other people were raped and given HIV. What makes my story worth telling? Who am I? Why should I ask for sympathy? And who would I even ask? So, I never asked anyone. I've never asked anyone for a thing. I don't want anyone to take care of me. I don't want people to celebrate my birthday. Or cook for me. Or tell me sweet words. I'm fine with giving love. But I can't accept it. Because I don't want anything that can ever be taken away."



This is a picture of my father before the genocide. He's surrounded by his Hutu friends. They're sharing beer. They're talking. They always viewed him as a good person. They'd even come to our home and flatter us. They'd tell my sisters and me how good of children we were. And that one day we'd marry their sons. Many of these men would later help kill my family. So how am I supposed to trust anyone? Before the genocide, there were doctors taking care of their patients. Priests were taking care of their followers. Neighbors were taking care of each other. But none of that stopped them from killing each other. And now we're being asked to forgive. Because our president tells us that reconciliation is the only path forward as a nation. And I know that he's right. So I'm trying my best. I'm spending time with Hutu people. I even found two Hutu elders to mentor my son. I want him to see that Hutus have good hearts. My son even calls them 'Grandpa.' So I understand the need for reconciliation. And I'm trying. Christianity has helped me a great deal. But true forgiveness is impossible. My entire family was murdered. How can I possibly forgive on behalf of those who can no longer speak for themselves? It's just not possible. But I will certainly pretend. Because I've seen where vengeance leads."

Discussion Questions

1. Before the genocide there was tension between the Hutus and Tutsi's in Rwanda, but often Hutu's and Tutsi's lived together, inter-married, and were friends. How is it possible for humans that are friends and family one day, to kill each other the next day?
2. Some Hutus, during the genocide, survived by turning over their neighbors, friends, and family members that were Tutsi's to attackers, but other Hutus risked their lives by hiding

and protecting Tutsis. Some Hutus even died for trying to hide and protect Tutsis. What is it within humans that makes some capable of sacrificing their lives for others, and others willing to trade someone else's life to protect their own?

3. Reflect on what you read. What stood out the most to you? What shocked you the most?
4. What did you learn from reading these two stories?
5. What do you think about this statement, "But true forgiveness is impossible. My entire family was murdered. How can I possibly forgive on behalf of those who can no longer speak for themselves? It's just not possible. But I will certainly pretend. Because I've seen where vengeance leads."?